



AGRICULTURAL BURNING



U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

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EPA MAKES NORTHWEST FIELD BURNING A TOP PRIORITY

EPA Region 10 is stepping up its efforts to reduce or eliminate harmful health effects related to agricultural burning in Washington, Oregon and Idaho. We are devoting significantly more resources -- people and money -- to this issue so that we can facilitate a more consistent and effective approach to managing the field burning issue region-wide. EPA's goal is to prevent agricultural burning from endangering people's health and safety across the three state region.

We recognize that the states and tribes have primary responsibility for addressing field burning. Our plan is to work in partnership with all interested and affected people and organizations to learn how field burning is currently managed and to help identify and address areas where improvements are needed and can occur.

What Specifically is EPA Doing?

- We are meeting with people throughout the Northwest to hear from different points of view on field burning. We are planning several Stakeholder Forums in the Northwest to gather and share information on different aspects of the issue. These forums will likely take place January through March 2001.
- We are funding several projects to improve air quality monitoring near field burning areas and studies that look at the toxicity of smoke, community exposure and potential health effects. We are funding other projects to research alternatives to field burning and the feasibility of using crop residues in making fiber-based products.
- We have participated in the mediation of a federal lawsuit related to field burning: *Save Our Summers v. Washington Department of Ecology*.
- To guide our efforts, we are developing a *Strategy for Agricultural Field Burning in Region 10* that will help us to: (1) prioritize our activities for the best use of resources; (2) improve understanding about where and why field burning occurs, its impacts and alternatives; and (3) create a framework for exploring long-term regional solutions with all stakeholders.

How Can You Get More Information?

We will provide information about the dates and locations of the stakeholder forums later this year. You can find out about EPA's strategy, the stakeholder forums and other information on EPA's **Region 10 website**: <http://www.epa.gov/r10earth/> (click on the button for AIR and then select Agricultural Field Burning).



Background

Some farmers in the Pacific Northwest burn the plant material remaining on their fields after harvest to prepare for planting the next crop. Burning is considered by some people to be an essential tool because it removes crop residue, makes seeding easier, helps maintain crop yields, and reduces the use of chemicals by combating plant diseases, harmful insects, and weeds. Burning can also reduce the need for tilling, which makes soil less susceptible to erosion and reduces water quality and windblown dust problems.

Despite the benefits, field burning can cause serious environmental and health effects. Burning creates a concentrated plume of smoke that can travel many miles. Although burning is usually conducted for short periods of time, the lingering cloud can affect air quality in communities both in the immediate area of the burn and those miles away. Critics of field burning believe there are economically feasible and more environmentally sound alternatives to burning. Some suggested alternatives to burning include crop rotation, raking and baling crop residue, no-till direct seeding, and using crop residue in fiber products like pulp and paper, building materials and textiles.

Why is EPA concerned?

Scientific studies -- along with thousands of complaints -- indicate that smoke is unhealthy. It is harmful because very fine particles, gases and other products of burning (some toxic) can be inhaled deeply into the lungs. Exposure to fine particles, either alone or combined with other air pollutants, has been linked to difficulty in breathing, aggravated asthma, increased emergency room visits and hospital admissions, and, in some cases, premature deaths. Those most at risk are children, the elderly and people with chronic respiratory problems.

Besides these health effects, dense smoke can impair local visibility and may create a public nuisance and dangerous driving conditions. As

smoke moves across state and tribal boundaries, it may lead to the formation of regional haze in pristine and scenic areas.

Even though agricultural burning can have serious environmental and health effects, the emissions from this practice rarely exceed federal air quality standards which limits EPA's ability to take action. State, local and tribal approaches to managing field burning vary across the region. Some areas have voluntary controls or mandatory permitting programs while others do not. The problems associated with field burning cross political boundaries and a more consistent regional approach is needed.

What About Other Sources of Smoke?

We know that agricultural burning is not the only source of smoke that can degrade air quality. Wildfires, controlled forest burns, fireplaces and open burning also contribute to poor air quality at certain times of the year. Each of these sources require a unique management approach and EPA is working with agencies across the region on these issues as well.

Contact Information

For more information on EPA's involvement in field burning, contact:

Scott Downey, EPA Region 10,
Office of Air Quality, OAQ-107,
1200 Sixth Ave, Seattle, WA 98101;
Phone: 206-553-0682 or
1-800-424-4372;
Email address: downey.scott@epa.gov

For information about the stakeholder forums, contact:

Don Martin, EPA Region 10,
Coeur d'Alene Field Office,
1910 NW Blvd, Suite 208,
Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814;
Phone: 208-665-0458; Email address:
martin.don@epa.gov